

Scottish Women's Convention response to:

The Scottish Government:

“Social Security Draft Equality Outcomes”

February 2020

The Consultation

Social Security Scotland is working to develop its first Equality Strategy. This strategy will ensure equality is at the centre.

The strategy will set out the commitment to mainstreaming equality, and this will be underpinned by a set of strong mainstreaming equality outcomes. These outcomes are the focus of this consultation. The Scottish Government (SG) are seeking views from clients and stakeholders to make sure these are:

- The right outcomes for a new growing organisation.
- Focused rightly towards making practical improvements and on addressing inequality.
- Clear on what the SG aim to achieve and how this can be measured to demonstrate this.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of Parliamentary, Governmental and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to social security.

The SWC has routinely used women's voices on numerous occasions over the past number of years around the devolution of social security and the creation of Social Security Scotland. As an organisation that places emphasis on the direct lived experiences of women, the SWC is pleased to note the commitment to equality that is being pushed forth here.

Outcome 1 - Social Security Scotland will deliver a seamless service that is inclusive and where our clients are able to access the support they need.

Do you feel this outcome meets the needs of protected groups?

The majority of recipients of social security in Scotland are overwhelmingly women. This is due to a number of persisting inequalities faced across all levels of society such as childcare costs, stereotypes in education and discrimination. It is vital that their needs are taken into account in order for Social Security Scotland to be fully accessible to all.

Ensuring an individualised, needs-based service that is integrated and unified from the first point of contact for service users is crucial. A system must be fostered in which the needs of protected groups are not just met but also exceeded. Women do not fall into one strict category but will be represented in a range of groups who will all have different needs and requirements. This must be actively considered when strategies are developed to ensure a clear equality thread runs through all outcomes.

Do you feel that the supporting activities stated will help achieve the stated outcome?

In order to make an impact on delivery, supporting activities that should be actively considered for inclusion should be:

- A continuous measurement of all activities under the remit to ensure all protected groups are being adequately accounted for.
- Training to ensure women's issues such as Violence against Women and Girls - VAWG - and harassment are consistently highlighted.
- An expansion on the delivery of the Social Security Charter so that it adequately reflects all protected groups.
- A focus on continuous accountability with regular equality updates for staff.
- A robust analysis of the effect of social security on protected characteristics.
- A commitment to train front line staff on mental health issues which many service users may represent with.
- Explicit commitment to ensuring that the geographical make up of Scotland and the barriers that this throws up is accounted for when delivering accessibility of service.

Do you feel that the measures of success stated will help Social Security Scotland measure the progress of this outcome?

Whilst the measures stated within the Consultation are exemplary, a further caveat that should be highlighted is a strong emphasis on the physical client base. This should involve the inclusion of ensuring a strong and fully representative focus on women's real lived experiences. It would also be useful to include measures from front line staff who will have first-hand knowledge of the impact of certain types of social security on specific protected groups.

Outcome 2 - Social Security Scotland will have a culture built on inclusivity where differences are supported, our people feel valued and they have opportunities to reach their full potential.

Do you feel this outcome meets the needs of protected groups?

Yes. Ensuring awareness of the fact that differences are supported and the value placed on employees is crucial in order to foster a robust work environment. A strong emphasis on individuals from all socioeconomic backgrounds being able to participate in the workforce is crucial.

Do you feel that the supporting activities stated will help achieve the stated outcome?

In order to make an impact on delivery of the stated outcome, supporting activities that should be actively considered for inclusion should be:

- Specific policies tailored to women's health needs such as a workplace menopause policy.
- Assurances that take account of the discrimination women continue to face. This could include paid leave for domestic abuse, etc.
- Continuous refreshment on guidance and procedures as laid out by the Equality Act including robust sexual harassment training as well as a zero tolerance policy.
- Ensuring all physical spaces are fully accessible and take account of all service user's needs and requirements.

Do you feel that the measures of success stated will help Social Security Scotland measure the progress of this outcome?

It would be advisable to include continuous meetings and consultation with workplace and trade union representatives. This ensures all needs are being catered for.

Outcome 3 - Social Security Scotland will be an employer of choice and through our recruitment process we will look to build a workforce that is representative of the population of Scotland.

Do you feel this outcome meets the needs of protected groups?

Yes. It is commendable that the workforce will be entirely representative of Scotland as a whole. Maximising opportunities for employment in terms of service users should also be actively considered under this proposal. This has the direct benefit of giving someone with first hand and lived experience the opportunity as well as ensuring maximum knowledge within the workforce.

Do you feel that the supporting activities stated will help achieve the stated outcome?

In order to make an impact on delivery of the stated outcome, supporting activities that should be actively considered for inclusion should be:

- Specific policies around upskilling and development opportunities for women including a clear commitment to women's mentoring programmes.
- An active policy on relieving the gender pay gap within Social Security Scotland as well as continuous publications outlining the current position and steps that have been taken.

Do you feel that the measures of success stated will help Social Security Scotland measure the progress of this outcome?

Yes. The clear commitment enshrined to highlight Social Security Scotland not just as a public agency but also as an employer that strives for equality is to be commended. Ensuring that effective procedures for the specific obstacles which stand in women's way in terms of employment and development are actively accounted for and robustly measured is crucial.

Outcome 4 - Social Security Scotland uses the equality data (evidence) collected from clients, our people and other sources to respond to feedback and continually improve the service provided to all clients.

Do you feel this outcome meets the needs of protected groups?

Yes. Utilisation of reliable and authoritative data in order to put forth the aims and outcomes of Social Security Scotland is a benefit wherein it seeks to improve the chances of protected groups.

Do you feel that the supporting activities stated will help achieve the stated outcome?

In order to make an impact on delivery of the stated outcome, supporting activities that should be actively considered for inclusion should be:

- A clear commitment to include others such as carers that do not fall under a protected group.
- Reference to data which includes first hand and lived experiences of the barriers that women might face to social security uptake and how this can be challenged.
- Scrutiny of the interaction between reserved and devolved social security in relation to service users with a particular emphasis on the roll out of Universal Credit.

Do you feel that the measures of success stated will help Social Security Scotland measure the progress of this outcome?

One of the most important tools of accountability is ensuring a qualitative approach is taken to benefit up take figures. This should include strong analysis of why numbers may be so low/high for particular groups and what can be done to augment this. It would also be beneficial if these procedures included measures to illustrate maximisation of income by benefit uptake and the positive effect of this in relieving poverty for particular groups.

Outcome 5 - Social Security Scotland's service is delivered through having established partnerships with relevant public sector, third sector and community bodies providing clients person centred advice no matter their circumstances.

Do you feel this outcome meets the needs of protected groups?

A main point that is highlighted within this particular outcome is the emphasis placed on person centred advice. Consultation with women by the SWC has shown that it is crucial to ensure all advice and information relevant to women and their particular circumstances is given to them. This is of fundamental importance for women accessing support through Social Security Scotland and should include full and adequate knowledge about everything they are entitled to. This should also include signposting towards other relevant authorities that can help individuals with their own circumstances.

Do you feel that the supporting activities stated will help achieve the stated outcome?

In order to make an impact on delivery of the stated outcome, supporting activities that should be actively considered for inclusion should be:

- Ensuring that all service users are aware of and put in contact with other relevant agencies and organisations that can assist them out with Social Security Scotland.
- Specific training for front line staff with a clear cut objective to determine and assess cases on a personalised basis, taking account of women's issues.
- A commitment that the design and implementation of such partnerships should be done in coordination with relevant third sector organisations and service users.

Do you feel that the measures of success stated will help Social Security Scotland measure the progress of this outcome?

The particular emphasis on feedback with direct reference to client experience is of the utmost importance in ensuring that the programme is as smooth and accessible as possible for all those accessing it. A coordinated response between all stakeholders including the public and third sector is needed to provide a targeted social security system for the most vulnerable.

Do you have any other comments or suggestions on our approach to equality?

Women throughout Scotland have held extensive discussions with the SWC in relation to social security. This is namely around devolution of certain aspects as well as the ongoing reforms taking place at a UK level over the past few years. The implementation of Universal Credit, welfare reform and ongoing austerity have had an overwhelming impact on those women who need social security the most.

Ensuring that a system is in place that can actively deter many of the issues regarding women and this push into poverty must be of the utmost importance. Whilst the vast majority of the potential relievers of this disadvantage remain reserved to the UK Government, ensuring equality within anything under the devolved remit is crucial.

Conclusion

The SWC welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Draft Equality Mainstreaming Outcomes and commends the Scottish Government for ensuring such a robust policy is in place going forward. The emphasis placed on equality within Social Security Scotland for both service users and employees is highly indicative of the human rights based approach as set out within the Social Security (Scotland) Act.

For further information, please contact

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